

# Addressing current and future challenges in EAL writing with Universal Design for Learning

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**Abstract.** Writing is an essential literacy skill that is crucial to meeting various social demands. It is also extremely difficult to master, especially for learners of an additional language who face significant barriers to learning. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), is an instructional framework promoted as an effective means of removing such barriers. The basis of UDL is that learning barriers are best addressed through curricula and lessons that provide multiple means of *engagement*, *representation*, and *action and expression*. This study explores the application of UDL in an English as an Additional Language (EAL) writing course at a Japanese university. The UDL guidelines were used in the design and implementation of goals, instruction, learning tasks, and assessments. Learners' perceptions of the UDL-based instruction were investigated using a questionnaire survey.

**Keywords:** writing, universal design for learning, inclusive learning.

## 1. Introduction

Writing is an essential literacy skill that is extremely difficult to master, especially for language learners who face many barriers to learning (Tillema, 2012). UDL, an instructional framework which often employs the affordances of digital technology, exists to remove such barriers (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Although the success of UDL in enhancing L1 writing instruction has been reported (e.g. in Vue & Hall, 2012), research on its use in EAL writing contexts is scarce. Addressing this gap, the current paper reports on the implementation of UDL-based instruction in an English writing course at a Japanese university. It describes how UDL informed the

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design of learning activities and assessments, and discusses learners' perceptions of the course.

UDL was developed from neuroscience and educational research and is based on three principles linked to the affective, recognition, and strategic learning networks (CAST, 2018). These principles are that learning barriers are best addressed through instruction that provides multiple means of *engagement*, *representation*, and *action and expression*. A set of guidelines (Figure 1) was created to help educators reflect on current practice and assess where learning barriers may exist. This enables the design of inclusive instruction that provides flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that optimize accessibility and engagement (Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2011).

## 2. Method

Participants were 40 first-year nursing students taking a 15-week English writing course. All were Japanese L1 users, aged between 18 and 20 years old. Participants' English proficiency levels equated approximately to an average CEFR<sup>2</sup> level of A2.

Types of writing in the course included descriptive, argumentative, and narrative texts. Activities included both individual and collaborative tasks, with learners creating an individual writing portfolio based on ten texts posted on an online forum and working on three collaborative tasks. The *UDL Guidelines* (CAST, 2018) were used in the design and implementation of the course. For example, to optimize individual choice and autonomy (checkpoint 7.1), choices of topics, tools, and means of expression were provided (e.g. each group assignment had topic choices and the narrative task could, after it was written, be presented in visual, dramatic, or textual formats). Also, to foster collaboration and community (checkpoint 8.3) learners formed small groups to do collaborative writing tasks and give peer support. In addition, an online forum was created for learners to share and respond to each other's writing. Further examples of the use of the UDL guidelines (Figure 1) can be found in the supplementary material<sup>3</sup>.

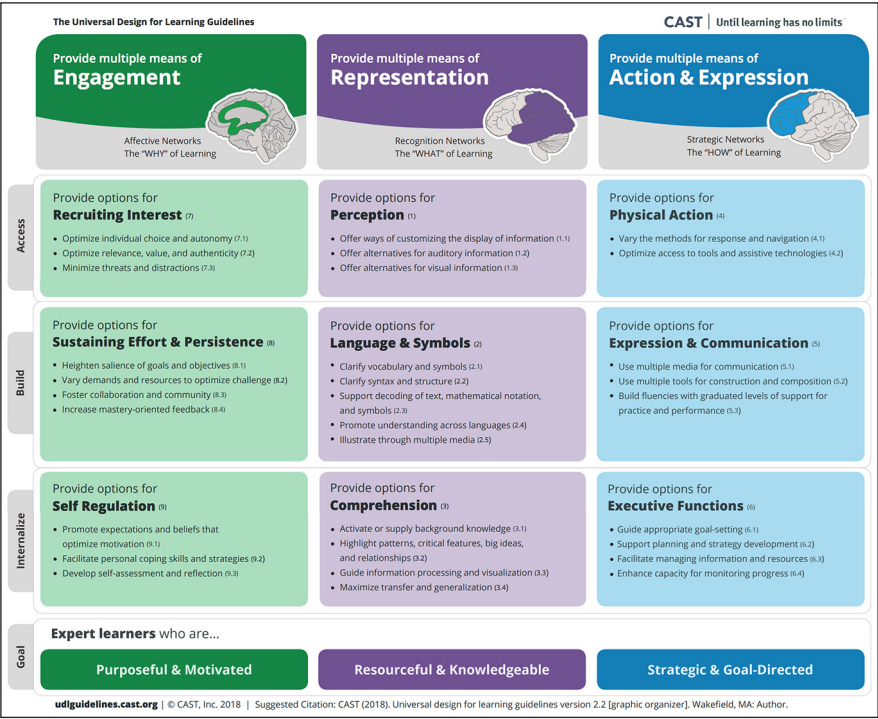
To investigate learners' perceptions of the UDL-based course, a questionnaire survey was administered in the final lesson. The questionnaire included items asking for a preference, a free comment section, and Likert items.

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2. Common European Framework of Reference for languages

3. <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/luuek05xzlok5bbc0yivolat2qzb95k>

Figure 1. UDL guidelines



### 3. Results

As discussed above, the questionnaire included several item types. Two questions were designed to elicit preferences regarding topics and expressive formats for assignments. Specifically, learners were asked whether they prefer being assigned a single topic and format for each assignment or to have a selection of topics and formats. The results indicated a clear preference for having options for both, with 80% of learners preferring a choice of topics and 88% preferring a choice of formats. In the free comment section, the most common theme to emerge was that learners considered the group writing tasks the best aspect of the course, with many comments directly praising them.

The results of the analysis of the Likert items data are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. These results also show strong support for group writing ( $M=4.45$ ), choice of topics ( $M=4.13$ ), as well as the usefulness of the teacher feedback ( $M=4.63$ ).

There was also strong support for the statement ( $M=4.28$ ) “Writing and reading posts on Edmodo improved my writing”.

Table 1. Learner evaluation of course and activities ( $n=40$ )

<b>1. How useful were the following for improving your English writing ability? (1=poor, 5=excellent), <math>\alpha = .82</math></b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Group Assignments	4.45	0.76
Writing Edmodo posts and comments	3.8	0.84
Textbook activities	3.6	0.74
Teacher feedback	4.63	0.63
<b>2. How interesting were the following activities (1=boring, 5=very interesting), <math>\alpha = .63</math></b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Group Assignments	4.45	0.68
Edmodo posts and comments	3.8	0.82
Textbook activities	3.6	0.87

Table 2. Learner responses to course-related statements ( $n = 40$ )

<b>Statements (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree), <math>\alpha = .82</math></b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
I prefer to write alone	3.08	1.05
I prefer to write with other students	4.08	0.73
I learn more when I write alone	3.2	0.88
I learn more when I write with other students	4.0	0.78
When I study alone, I am motivated to learn English	3.23	0.89
When I study with other students, I am motivated to learn English	4.13	0.65
I understood the teacher’s presentation of information in class	4.05	0.75
Writing and reading posts on Edmodo improved my English writing	4.28	0.72
I enjoyed writing and reading posts on Edmodo	3.73	0.85
The group assignments improved my English writing	4.13	0.69
I enjoyed doing the group assignments	4.5	0.64
The writing portfolio improved my English writing	4.35	0.66
The teacher’s comments on my writing portfolio were useful	4.6	0.55
It is better to have a choice of topics for each assignment	4.13	0.85
It is better to have one topic for each assignment	3.35	1.12

## 4. Discussion

This study investigated learner perceptions of a UDL-based writing course. One important finding was the learners’ favorable response to collaborative writing activities. The inclusion of collaborative writing opportunities was informed by

UDL checkpoints such as foster collaboration and community, build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance, and enhance capacity for monitoring progress. Although findings on the effects of collaborative writing on language learning gains are mixed (Storch, 2016, p. 395) both socioconstructivist and second language acquisition theories offer strong support for its use (Grosbois, 2016, p. 271). Collaborative writing provides opportunities for learners to learn from more advanced peers and, through the process of writing a common text, learners can notice gaps between their existing linguistic knowledge and the target language, test and receive feedback on new hypotheses about language, and be encouraged to reflect on the language produced, all of which benefit language acquisition.

Another important finding was the strong support for options for both topics and expressive formats. Based on UDL checkpoints related to optimizing individual choice and autonomy and options for expression and communication, the provision of topic choices for each group writing assignment and, where possible, of expressive formats, appeared to make tasks more accessible for learners, enabling them to express themselves in ways suited to their individual strengths and interests.

While it is possible to include the types of activities, assessments, tools, and feedback implemented here without referring to UDL, using the framework enables informed decision making with a source based on extensive research. The UDL framework, which is updated as new knowledge comes to light, has principles, guidelines, and checkpoints which provide a systematic strategy for evaluating our current learning environments and to explore ways to make them more accessible and effective for all learners.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is hoped that this paper has provided an understanding of UDL and how it might be used to reduce learning barriers not only in EAL writing classrooms, but in all language learning contexts. Although this study did not focus on specific writing outcomes, it found that overall learners considered that the collaborative writing tasks, options for topics and expressive formats, the online forum, and mastery-oriented teacher feedback especially contributed to improving their writing abilities. While this is promising, research investigating the effects of UDL-based learning on specific aspects of learners' writing is a necessary step in further evaluating its efficacy.

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